

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

U.S. EDITION

International
Russia Asks U.S. to Curb Afghan Opium

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638 words

11 August 2003

The Wall Street Journal

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A7

English

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MOSCOW -- Calling attention to a growing sore spot between Washington and Moscow, Russia's newly appointed top drug cop said the U.S. could do more to reduce the flow of heroin from Afghanistan.

Gen. Viktor Cherkessov, whose appointment this spring to head Russia's huge new drug-enforcement agency signals Moscow's new emphasis on the problem, said in an interview recently that drug production in Afghanistan has increased "catastrophically." Asked if the U.S. is doing enough to help stem the problem, he chose his words carefully, saying that America isn't using its vast resources "to the fullest extent" to curtail production of Afghan opium.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, illegal drug use in Russia has skyrocketed, and heroin from Afghanistan is a favorite. That, in turn, has fueled explosive epidemics of HIV and other blood-borne viruses, such as hepatitis C.

During its last year in power, Afghanistan's Taliban regime virtually eliminated opium-poppy production, though this may have been an attempt to boost prices by restricting supply rather than a genuine antidrug effort. The Taliban profited from the drug trade, according to international drug experts.

But under U.S.-led occupation, Afghanistan's poppy output has surged again, accounting for more than three-quarters of world production. Gen. Cherkessov projects that this year's harvest will total 4,000 tons, up from the 3,422 tons that the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime says Afghanistan produced last year, its second-biggest harvest ever. Afghanistan produces virtually all the heroin sold in Russia and more than three-quarters of the heroin sold in Europe. Russia is a transit route for heroin headed to Western Europe.

U.S. intelligence knew long before Sept. 11 that opium puts money into the coffers of al Qaeda and other terrorist groups. But over the past year, the U.S. hasn't curtailed production -- a situation about which Russian officials privately express outrage. In the interview, Gen. Cherkessov also derided U.N. efforts to encourage Afghan farmers to switch to other crops, saying no other crop matches opium's profit potential. He said the international community and the U.S. should work with Afghan forces to conduct military operations to stop opium production.

The general said he recently met with the U.S. ambassador to Russia together with a high-level group of American drug experts. Officials at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow declined to comment on the meeting, but a law-enforcement specialist there said that the U.S. is "providing equipment, vehicles, technical assistance and specialized training to antinarcotics units based near the Russian-Kazakh border in order to strengthen Russian law enforcement's counter-narcotics capability." The official said the measures are aimed partly at stemming drug traffic from Afghanistan.

Gen. Cherkessov is a key member of President Vladimir Putin's inner circle of power. He and Mr. Putin studied together at Leningrad State University and, like the president, Gen. Cherkessov was a KGB officer. He headed up the Leningrad investigative department and hounded dissidents. A tall, husky man with silver hair, the 53-year-old is smooth but considered very tough.

His newly created State Committee for the Control of the Circulation of Narcotic and Psychotropic Substances has about 40,000 employees, and the bulk of its investigators come from the newly disbanded tax police. Gen. Cherkessov says he plans to exploit their financial expertise to attack drug lords through their

money-laundering and other financial dealings. While his investigators will focus on narco-mafia kingpins, he said, ordinary police will continue "without decrease" to arrest and jail small-time users and dealers.

Jeanne Whalen contributed to this article.

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